

Nguyen Dinh Nguyen, age 19

I come from a far, far away country, one on the other side of the Earth that is only known for fighting against big nations. Ambush is our specialty; bamboo traps are customers' favorite. Would you like to have some, welcome to Vietnam?

So when I came to America for the first time last year, I understood there **were** tons of things I needed to LEARN AND prepare for. I studied American history. I watched shows like Glee or Friends or Desperate Housewives. I read the *New York Times*, the *Economist* and, of course, random celebrity gossip. I even took the US History SAT TEST and I'm glad I can keep my scores private. Through those preparations, I was aware that some American people can be very religious, but I was so excited for this journey, and so confident about my ability to get to other people's heart the only thing on my mind was just to go. Everybody will like you if you are sincere.

So reality slapped me in the face one evening during my first month in America, in the college dining hall. I was sitting with a redheaded girl whom I **had** just met a few days before. She is one of the sweetest, smartest, **and** most caring students that I know. I'd just learned that she was Jewish, so I asked her, "So you celebrate Hanukkah instead of Christmas?"

"Yes," She said.

I was curious, "Here's the thing. We people from Vietnam are generally not that religious. To us, Christmas is just an occasion to have fun. If we throw a Christmas party, would you join us?"

She went silent. She was avoiding eye contact, then gazed down at something far and distant, and said simply, "NO."

I was shocked, but I tried to sound reasonable.

“No? Not even as friends? Otherwise it makes us sad,” I said.

She fixed her stare on the table, and spoke, very slowly and deliberately, “My friends are very important to me, but my religion is special.”

I could only tell her that it kind of made me sad, that there seemed to be a separation between us that shouldn't exist in the first place.

In my culture, people do not take religions that seriously. We believe in our ancestors, our grandfathers, grandmothers, great-grandparents who passed away and we know, as family, they will bless us from the above. We know for sure we will be loved, because we are their children, so we do not look for any supreme god or higher power and fear them the way some people here do.

You see: I am gay. During my darkest time struggling with my own prejudice of myself and of others, my friends were the shelter, the family that I could turn to. They were the ones I confided in about my very first heartbreak. They were the ones **who** proofread my coming out letter to my family, insisting that whatever happens, they **would** have my back. They are the source of my energy, the living proof of love. So for me, friends are more about the synchronization of the souls than the sameness of skin color, or economy, or religion. That's what I profoundly believe in. And that's also why I was so confused and bewildered when somebody **allowe**d religions to put a boundary between themselves and the people who may become the home for their heart. Why do religions, supposed to teach love and acceptance of all, seed such prejudices and barriers among humankind? That kept me thinking for a while.

Until I shook off these thoughts and told myself to forget them. I will put the religion talk aside. I will come to people the way I came to them when we first met—as individuals, wandering across an international party looking for friends because we were “sad and lonely.” And we did become friends based on our personalities, my wry jokes and their banter.

One of the most fanatic fans of my humor is a deeply religious girl who does not drink, does not party, and who drives miles to her church despite the availability of a very decent one on campus. She would crack up at anything I say, sometimes to the point that it concerns me, and I almost wanted to say “Hey. Are you okay? I know it’s hard being away from home for the first time and you may feel lonely and depressed and sad and you laugh way too much. Would you like to talk?”

I’m glad I didn’t say that to her, but the point is that I think we can truly be friends, and I admit to have felt hesitant to become friends with her because of her devotion. It’s crucial, essential, and earth-shatteringly important to make the first move, to break the boundaries, the prejudices that we all have, and be ready to touch another individual THROUGH A THING AS JOYFUL AND UPLIFTING AS MIRTH AND TASTEFUL JOKES.

MAYBE WHAT WE NEED TO DO MORE OF IS FIND A SAFE PLACE TO LAUGH TOGETHER ACROSS OUR RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES.

So what about CREATING a place where students are required to come together and interact with students from different RELIGIONS, where fun is the theme, and understanding is the code. We can always start with the student leaders who are more willing and mature ENOUGH to break through the initial social awkwardness. Let the leaders converse, let them have fun with each other, let them like each other, and things will go much easier once we like the person we are working with. We want to forego the trivial

differences.

You can probably tell I am not a religious person. Last year I couldn't even tell the difference between Catholics and Christianity. I would not talk about religions or be standing here right now at all, unless my experience with the redheaded girl forced me to realize it's a reality that our beliefs can stifle our chance of becoming friends. We are all human. Before we put on our bodies different uniforms and on our mind different devotions, we are all born naked with the same soul that always longs for connection. The ancient Indians believed that every religion in this world contains a special thread, and that all these threads are always looking for one another. Probably that is the way it should be. Instead of shutting **out** each other, instead of trying to replace faith with certainty—"I am right, you are wrong, shut up," we all should actively look for each other, listen to each other and build ourselves up together. Go hug a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist—or maybe simply another human being who also has a desire to connect with you. You may be tempted to live a comfortable life without having to adjust to differences, but at the end of your life, what do you want to say looking back at your time in this limited space? That you have lived, have opened your heart to every beautiful creations of the universe—despite the nervousness and anxiety—and feel like everybody strolling this planet is your friend, your brother, your sister? Or that you have played it safe? The answer lies with you. Laugh together, then we can cry together. Only when we can cry together can we truly live together.